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ABSTRACT

An action research study examined the use of an extensive experiential assignment to introduce preservice elementary teachers to the field of special education. The study documents the use of 58 students' experiences in a difficult learning situation and investigates the transference of this learning experience to course content on individualizing a program for special needs students. Results indicated that students who do the "Klutz Experience" develop empathy for the struggles of special education students and also learn how to write an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), use alternative assessments, and motivate and support special education students. Findings suggest a way to alter the isolation of course content and to help avoid the objectification of special education as "other." (Contains 12 references.) (Author/BT)

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Weaving Experiential Education into a Preservice Special Education Course: The Klutz Experience.

by Jacque Ensign

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Weaving Experiential Education into a Preservice Special Education Course: The Klutz Experience

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Abstract:
"Weaving Experiential Education into a Preservice Special Education Course: The Klutz Experience" is an action research study of the use of an extensive experiential assignment in introducing preservice elementary teachers to the field of special education. This study documents the use of students' experiences in a difficult learning situation and investigates the transference of this learning experience to course content on individualizing a program for special needs students. The study finds that students who do the Klutz Experience develop empathy for the struggles of special education students and also learn how to write an IEP, use alternative assessments, and motivate and support special education students. This study suggests a way to alter the isolation of course content and to help avoid the objectification of special education students as "other."

INTRODUCTION

Typically, educators have taught special education course content in a way that is disconnected from preservice teachers' personal lives rather than using meaningful ways for preservice teachers to learn course content and understand the needs of special education students. When students read their syllabus for Teaching Exceptional Students in the Regular Education Classroom, this is the first assignment:

> Choose one skill to learn over two months. This skill should be in an area in which you are presently a "klutz." Choose something which you cannot do well, or which you have avoided in the past, or one which will take a long time for you to do well. It can be something physical (e.g. rock climbing, dancing, swimming), or a language, or music, or a craft, or another skill which meets the requirements. Find a teacher to help you learn this skill. A teacher can be anyone, of any age, who is competent and confident in the skill you want to learn and willing to help you learn the skill.

This study documents the use of students' experiences in the Klutz Experience and investigates the transference of this learning experience to course content on individualizing a program for special needs students. The following questions are addressed:

1) To what extent and in what ways did the preservice teachers develop empathy for the struggles of special education students?
2) To what extent did the preservice teachers learn how to write an IEP, use alternative assessments, and motivate and support special education students?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Klutz Experience was conceptualized within the theoretical constructs of experiential education. The Association for Experiential Education (1998) defines experiential education as "a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences." How this learning is accomplished is dependent on several other factors, including meaningfulness and reflection.

John Dewey argued that experiences alone are not educative. Teaching and learning have to be viewed as a continuous process of reconstruction of experience (Dewey 1938, 87). According to Dewey, for experiences to be educative they have to include genuine problems for the learner (Dewey 1916, 155) and they have to "live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences." (Dewey 1938, 27-28) The experience must come from a problem that the learner is interested in solving and like a good novel, be one that the learner can relate to at the moment as well as continue to think about and find meaning after the initial experience or reading is completed. Through later reflection on the experience in the light of subsequent experiences, learning can continue to occur. Like Dewey, Joplin has emphasized that "experience alone is insufficient to be called experiential education. It is the reflection process that turns experiences into experiential education." (Joplin 1981, 17) In a course, that reflection process can be guided and enhanced by readings and discussions, as well as by journaling.

Horwood (1995) has noted the importance in experiential education of a holistic experience that engages the emotions, intellect, and bodies of the learners. With the theoretical framework of effective experiential education in mind, this Klutz Experience was designed to fully involve the participants, rather than what typically occurs in teacher preparation courses. Generally, research papers and other academic assignments used in preservice special education courses tend to only engage the intellect of students. Noting how extensively special education students engage teachers in emotional and physical as well as academic issues, it seemed important to find an assignment that would reflect the intensity of teaching a special education student.

When special education teacher preparation courses include experiential assignments, these experiences usually fall into one of the following categories: field observations, mock teaching using peers instead of special

education students (Beigel 1993), simulations (Evans 1985), case studies (Elksnin 1998; Munby & Hutchinson 1998), role playing (Lowenbraun 1998), or internships (Cooke 1981, Cantor 1997). Whereas these typical forms of experiential assignments place the pre-service teachers in a position of interacting with real or imaginary special education students or pretending to be special education students, this Klutz Experience places the prospective teachers in the position of a long-term experience of being the less-than-able students, thus involving their emotions, intellect, and bodies more than typical preservice course assignments do.

The aim of the Klutz Experience was to have students experience first hand trying to learn a skill when there are major obstacles. It was also designed to provide an opportunity for preservice teachers to develop empathy and caring for special education students. I wanted my preservice teachers to recognize that we each share some of the traits of special education students, that even "normal" students have an element of special education traits (hurdles to cross, difficulties to accept and from which to learn). Also, I wanted my preservice teachers to recognize that special education students are more like other students than different, that they too want to be accepted, to have friends, and to succeed. By seeking to break down the rigid boundaries between regular education and special education, this philosophical stance of the Klutz Experience challenges the objectification of special education students as "Other."

METHODS OF INQUIRY

The research was conducted by the researcher while teaching two semesters of an undergraduate teacher certification course on teaching exceptional children in the regular classroom. Each class was composed of over 30 students (35 in 1997, 31 in 1998) in regular education certification programs. The control group was composed of another section of the same course with similar students, taught by a professor who did not use the Klutz Experience but whose teaching is similar (content, achievement expectations) to the researcher who taught the experimental classes. None of the students had had previous courses in special education, nor did they have prior knowledge and skills for developing an IEP and working with special education students. Unfortunately, due to different assignments in each class, the final assessment was required for the experimental classes and given as extra credit in the control class, yielding a sample size of 31 for the 1998 experimental class and only 8 for the 1998 control class. Fortunately for purposes of validity, the 8 in the control group represent a normal distribution of students in that class. Academically in the control class, two students taking the final assessment were in the top of the class, four were in the middle of the class, and two were in the bottom of the class.

the Klutz Experience

For the Klutz Experience, the preservice students were to choose something at which they were not at all proficient. Students were advised to choose a skill where they expected to make little progress, in order to replicate a bit of what a special education student experiences. Students were to find someone to teach them this klutz skill for two months. Some of the klutz skills chosen were juggling, dancing, cooking, sewing, foreign language, typing, computer literacy, and playing a musical instrument. Other klutz skills chosen included golf, basketball, drawing, driving a standard car, quilting, knitting, bookkeeping, accounting, tennis, roller blading, kick boxing, braiding hair, singing, jewelry, and woodworking. The assignment was completed over the course of the semester.

As new techniques were learned in class, the preservice teachers were to apply those techniques to their own Klutz Experience and bring their journal entries of those experiences to the next class to share and discuss with classmates. For example, after the professor had discussed the importance of keeping detailed notes on special education students prior to and after referral, the preservice teachers were to keep a weekly journal to address the following areas: the content of that week's lesson, what the teacher did that helped learning, what the teacher did that hindered learning, and how the student felt during the lesson. After the professor had demonstrated writing an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan), the preservice teachers were to write an IEP for themselves for their klutz skill. They were to include an authentic assessment tool with a scoring rubric for assessing progress in their klutz skill. They brought their IEPs to the following class to share and improve by working collaboratively with other classmates, just as an IEP would be developed by a team for a special education student. Their final IEP guided their lessons in the klutz experience and was included in their portfolio.

Samples of previous students' journals, IEPs, and assessment rubrics were available on the course website as guides for students to understand the Klutz Experience. On the final assessment, students were given case studies of three special education students. They were expected to write IEPs and explain how to individualize instruction and assess progress for these special education students.

data sources

1) To answer question one on the extent to which and ways in which preservice teachers develop empathy for the struggles of special education students, the following were used: journal entries, e-mail communications from the students to the professor, final self-evaluations, and class discussions.

2) To investigate whether the preservice teachers learned how to write an IEP, use alternative assessments, and motivate and support special education students, their portfolios and the final assessment were used.

Due to differences in assignments between the experimental classes using the Klutz Experience and the control class which did not use the Klutz Experience, the only comparison data available was the final assessment, measuring whether the preservice teachers learned how to write an IEP, use alternative assessments, and motivate and support special education students. The final assessment used in this research consisted of a written case study of a special education student and the following directions:

> Write an IEP for this child in which you focus on what you as a classroom teacher can do to enhance the education of this child. Address these sections of the IEP: (i) a statement of the child's present levels of educational performance, including how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general curriculum; (ii) a statement of two measurable annual goals, including benchmarks or short-term objectives, related to meeting the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum. (iii) For how the child's progress toward the annual goals described in clause (ii) will be measured, develop a scoring rubric for one of the goals or objectives.

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

developing empathy for special education students

Of the 58 Klutz Experience students surveyed with an open-ended final self-evaluation, when asked "How did this 'klutz' activity help you understand how special education students feel in classes in which they can't do well, the following were their responses:

*35	experienced frustration
11	experienced wanting to give up
9	experienced feeling angry
* 8	experienced doing my best and still not succeeding
4	experienced feeling dumb
* 4	experienced feeling discouraged with failure
* 3	experienced feeling learning was a struggle
* 1	experienced feeling embarrassed
1	experienced feeling confusion
* 1	experienced moments of hopefulness

*In their weekly journals, nearly every student recorded the experiences that are starred above, even though they did not self-report these on the survey.

In a class discussion of these feelings, students noted feeling angry when they felt their teacher didn't care, when they were paired with a superior student, and when they felt rushed to succeed. They felt hopeful when they were

rewarded or saw the potential for a reward, when they reviewed a skill and had success, and when they could see what was possible.

Students experienced being very incompetent in the klutz activity they chose. As an example of these experiences, this note from a student's teacher describes one student's experience. "Chris came to me as a friend and asked me to teach him how to rollerblade. To my amazement, for such an athletic individual, he had no idea how to rollerblade. On this first day of learning, Chris was absolutely horrible at this activity. He had no idea what was going on nor any concept of rollerblading. I tried to teach him very basic skills such as standing up and keeping his feet straight, but it was like teaching an infant how to crawl. I hope he improves for his own sake."

In their weekly journals, students described their experiences and the empathy that came from those experiences:

frustration

"I have to admit when I first started this project I was not sure of what, if anything, I was going to get out of it. I actually, upon conclusion of it, have learned a great deal. It has given me first hand experience of feeling two things especially, frustration and a lack of coordination. I could really see how a child with any type of disability could be experiencing something very similar to this on a day to day basis in a regular classroom."

"Learning to juggle can be extremely frustrating. This week I feel as though I am getting worse instead of better."

doing my best and still not succeeding

"I felt a sort of self gratification because I was learning so much in guitar. However, I felt incompetent. I was trying my hardest and it wasn't good enough for my teacher. I felt frustrated. If I had to pick a day that I was able to relate with a special education student, I would pick today. I can't keep a steady beat no matter how hard I try!"

"There were times when my teacher would almost make me feel 'dumb.' He would give me a look to indicate that I should already know the answer. I didn't like this because I was trying my best to learn all that I could."

"Because I get anxious, I notice I have this feeling like, "Come on! Let's go! Let's just get this thing done!" I hate that feeling I get of not having enough patience. One thing I have learned in this project is that my heart really goes out to those children who have to struggle for every little or big thing that they do. I am not sure I could do it if every day was a struggle. Life for them must be such a chore at times. I hope as a teacher I can make it a little easier for some of the children, if not just one child."

feeling discouraged with failure

"My teacher was very anxious for me to learn this trick. He was anxious because he said he is getting bored with the 'easy stuff' and he is ready to teach me the more difficult tricks. This slowed my performance because I felt rushed, and I felt as though I wasn't able to learn the trick fast enough. This had a negative impact on my performance."

"I get so mad. I can't believe how I am not getting this. I don't think once this project is over, I will ever pick up knitting rods again."

low- confidence

"I am beginning to understand what it must feel like for a student to be in unfamiliar territory. I felt so helpless at the fabric store when I was buying my pattern, material, and supplies. I was totally dependent on the sales lady for help and if she gave me the wrong things, I would never have known the difference. When I first went to buy the pattern, I had to wait about 15 minutes for a sales lady to help me. So I just stood there like a dope, waiting. I had absolutely no clue where to begin, what to look for in a pattern, or what to buy. I felt like a baby except that I could talk and express my needs."

"During the lesson, I felt confident, but after the lesson, I lost all of my confidence. I felt let down because I undercooked the pasta and it was too hard. I thought I had timed it correctly and I even tested it, but my teacher was there to remind me that I still need more lessons on cooking. I even overheated the sauce. It was very hot. Cooking is not easy no matter what is being made."

"This language is impossible and I do not know how Turkish people even learn to speak it!!! I wish I had picked something I could have had a better chance at accomplishing. It bothers me that I am not advancing during my lessons. We go over the same material every week and all I can do is recite after Ferhan. It feels like my mouth is rejecting the new sounds. This project is definitely giving me a taste of what a learning disabled child goes through. I feel so confused. It must be hard to be exposed to material that is so very foreign to them. Then on top of it all, having a teacher that is not properly educated or willing to adapt the curriculum to help the child, it would add negative self esteem to the child's problem."

writing IEP, using alternative assessments, motivating and supporting special education students

Students were assessed on their ability to write an IEP, use alternative assessments, and note ways to support a special education student, first on themselves in the Klutz Experience and later in the final assessment. None of the students in the experimental and control classes were able to write an IEP at the beginning of the course. Correlating 1998 experimental students' scores on the Klutz Experience and the final assessment, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient is significant at the O.01 level ($r = 0.631$, $n = 31$). When 1997 scores on the Klutz Experience and the final assessment are correlated, a lower correlation coefficient is produced, significant at a 0.05 level of significance. The lower correlation is possibly due to poorer directions for the Klutz Experience since that was the first year of using the klutz assignment ($r = 0.3845$, $n = 35$). Despite the differences in confidence levels, both years show significant correlation between the Klutz Experience and the final assessment, indicating that how students do on the Klutz Experience is similar to how they do on the final assessment.

To determine whether the difference between mean scores on the 1998 experimental group (with Klutz Experience) and the 1998 control group (without Klutz Experience) is significant, a t-test was conducted. On the final assessment, of a possible 30 points, the mean score for the 1998 experimental students is 25.42 ($n = 31$, $\sigma = 3.62$) while the mean score for the 1998 control students is 16 ($n = 8$, $\sigma = 3.30$). With $t = 7.06$, the difference in means between the two groups is significant at a 0.01 level, indicating that those students who were assigned the Klutz Experience performed better on the final assessment of writing an IEP, using alternative assessments, and noting ways to support a special education student than those who were not assigned the Klutz Experience.

more on how to motivate and support special education students
When asked on the final self-evaluation and in a later class discussion what they had learned from the Klutz Experience that they can use to help special education students be motivated and learn in difficult subjects, students listed the following (which interestingly encompass nearly all of the suggestions given in literature on effective teaching of special education students):

encourage
break the work into smaller parts
make the work fun and interesting
monitor progress with the student's help
set attainable goals with the student
let the student sometimes choose the material
work with the student's strengths
minimize distractions
give positive reinforcement
use extreme patience
be careful with time constraints
be flexible by trying different approaches
use humor
relate the learning to something the student is interested in
allow the student to play with the developing skill
review the skills learned so the student experiences success
respond to student's requests for help
start where the student is and go at the student's pace
give the student challenges that are possible
be caring, develop a good relationship with the student
provide a safe space
trust in the student, don't give up

In their weekly journals, students noted specific techniques that their teachers had used that they thought would be useful to use with special education students:

"I have decided that I am going to learn sign language. I have a three year old cousin who is hearing impaired and I would like to be able to communicate with her using sign language. Heather has started teaching me the basics. She made up a math game where I

would start by signing a number (let's say 5), then Heather would sign 'minus 3,' then I would have to sign the answer. I really enjoyed our math game."

"Since this is the first trick I have learned using the yo-yo, I was a little nervous approaching this lesson. My teacher planned the lessons appropriately, because he began teaching this trick with the 'Up-Down Technique' which I already know. This was helpful to my performance because I was able to apply something I have already learned to something I am in the beginning stages of learning. This gave me more confidence and motivation to learn and had a positive impact on my performance."

"I think I learned a great deal from this last lesson. I can really see the progress I have made as a student and I think that I will be able to apply what I have learned in teaching my own students. I think that my son's attitude and willingness to work with me have been the most important parts of these lessons. I had never looked at how someone teaches quite this way before. This exercise has given me the opportunity to experience an approach to learning that I would not have explored otherwise."

"This 'klutz' project made me realize the importance of a teacher's attitude in the classroom. It is important for the teacher to have confidence in his or her students so that the students have confidence in themselves. The students need to feel that someone believes in them and feels that they have the ability to complete the task or learn the skill. When I got frustrated trying to learn how to make the French braid, it was my teacher's positive attitude and belief in my abilities that gave me the confidence to continue."

"I have been able to get an idea of different ways of teaching that could be used to lessen bad feelings and enhance the good ones. I have seen that patience, creativity, and flexibility are extremely important skills to know. I really feel that by participating in this assignment I have expanded my knowledge of different ways of teaching."

"I think I felt a little less enthusiastic about this lesson because the lesson was devoid of any meaning. Without an idea of the practical applications of the radial arm saw, I was not able to think about how I would use it for everyday purposes. I was discouraged to use the tool in this fashion and it helped me to have yet one more reason for using an integrated curriculum in elementary school classrooms."

"Today's class in kickboxing made me think of how hard it is for a teacher to make sure all the students are doing what they are supposed to be doing when there is a large class. Because there were more people in the class tonight, I didn't have one on one help from my teacher. It was easy to get caught in the crowd and not do the task correctly."

"I noticed that when the teacher changes the routine or teaches something differently, my energy increases. As a teacher, I must remember to keep the learning interesting and not too repetitive."

importance of interpersonal relationships

An unexpected learning experience occurred when I required the teachers of the klutz lessons to write periodic narratives of their students' progress. I had included these as a security check to be sure my students were doing regular klutz lessons. Since my students collected them as part of their journals, we were able to discuss the impact that the teacher-student relationship makes

on learning. There is a humanness and poignancy in some of the teacher's narratives that mirror many of the students' journal entries.

One student's twelve year-old son taught her golf. In her journal, she wrote, "I was having a very difficult time getting my hands and feet and hips and head and the golf club to work all at the same time. It was, needless to say, extremely frustrating from the very start. I took a deep breath, and thought, "I will NEVER be able to do this." Her son's evaluation of her at the end of two months reflects his sensitivity to her frustration: "Beth can down a half swing now at her final lesson. Unfortunately, she thinks that she is really bad. I reassured her that she was learning fast and that it would take at least a hundred lessons to get to the skill level I'm at now. Still she gets frustrated frequently and says that golf is so uncomfortable. I told her again that if she sticks to it, she will get used to it."

"When we began this project, my brother's algebra skills were limited. He is 21 and I am 16. He couldn't perform the basic steps needed to solve a simple equation. After explaining the laws and rules of algebra to him in the first lesson, he was able to solve a very basic algebra equation. While my brother was figuring out his problem, I looked ahead in his book and realized I will be seeing a lot more of my brother this semester."

"As one of Sarah's soccer players, I have enjoyed the opportunity to be the 'coach' for the past eight weeks instead of the 'player.' Sarah made my job easy because she has been so enthusiastic about learning this new skill. The lessons have made the bus rides this season go by faster because we spent time on our weekly trips practicing French braiding. She has not only learned how to make one braid, but two braids in one person's hair. In addition to Sarah and me, our whole team got involved in this project because their heads were used as models. This project not only taught Sarah how to French braid, but it also brought our team closer together."

and the exhilaration of learning that we hope all students will experience
Students learned that success is relative and that even small progress can mean a lot to a student who is struggling.

"My dad watched as I hit some more golf balls, and after successfully driving the ball 10-30 yards or so, he said, "You see, you CAN hit the ball!" I think at this point I actually experienced faint ticklings and twinges of that feeling that is so hard to describe: it's like a combination of a taste of success, a pinch of happiness, and a sprinkling of enlightenment. It was as if all the aspects of me being able to do this whole golf thing (which I really was convinced up until now I definitely would not be able to ever do) suddenly came and hit me on the head and said, "Here put it all together and see what you've got!" It was a giddy feeling, and a very happy one, and I said to my father with a big grin on my face, "Well, yeah, I guess I can!" Now that I had seen that I could actually hit golf balls a distance and straight, my confidence seemed to find its way down to fill the empty feeling in the pit of my stomach. Everything we had been working on all finally clicked."

CONCLUSIONS

In keeping with the literature on successful experiential learning, this Klutz Experience posed genuine problems (mostly physical) for the students that they were interested in, provided multiple forums for reflecting on the experience, and definitely involved the emotional.

While components of experiential learning are typically included in preservice special education courses, this study finds that using an extensive experiential assignment as a base for an entire special education course is an effective and meaningful way for students to develop empathy for special education students and to learn course content. Students developed empathy for special education students as well as learned to construct an IEP, to use authentic assessment, to construct a portfolio and assessment rubrics, and to motivate and support learners who have special needs in a regular classroom.

The strength of this study is in the extensive qualitative data gathered on the students in the Klutz Experience. While the quantitative data indicates the positive effects of using the Klutz Experience, further research is planned to address some of the limitations of this present study. Strengthening the design for quantitative analysis will include 1) increasing the size of the control group and use of an entire matched class, rather than making participation optional in the control group; 2) a formal preassessment of students in both the control and experimental groups; and 3) a scoring rubric so that future final assessments can be scored by someone other than the researcher who is the experimental course instructor.

While the Klutz Experience had a strong impact on preservice teachers, some had difficulty transferring what they had learned in the Klutz Experience to envisioning how they would apply their insights to teaching a special education student. Near the end of the Klutz Experience, students were to observe a special education student in a regular classroom, research the disability, and make suggestions for how to meet this student's needs. While students found this useful, several suggested that they needed to go beyond observing to actually working with the special education student. This suggestion is in line with one of Dewey's requirements for an experience to be educative: that it "live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences (Dewey 1938, 27-28) ." A possible solution to this would be to overlap the last four weeks of the Klutz Experience with an additional assignment to tutor a special education student and keep a journal of that experience. This would allow the preservice teachers to experience and reflect on aspects of special education both as a learner and as a teacher.

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